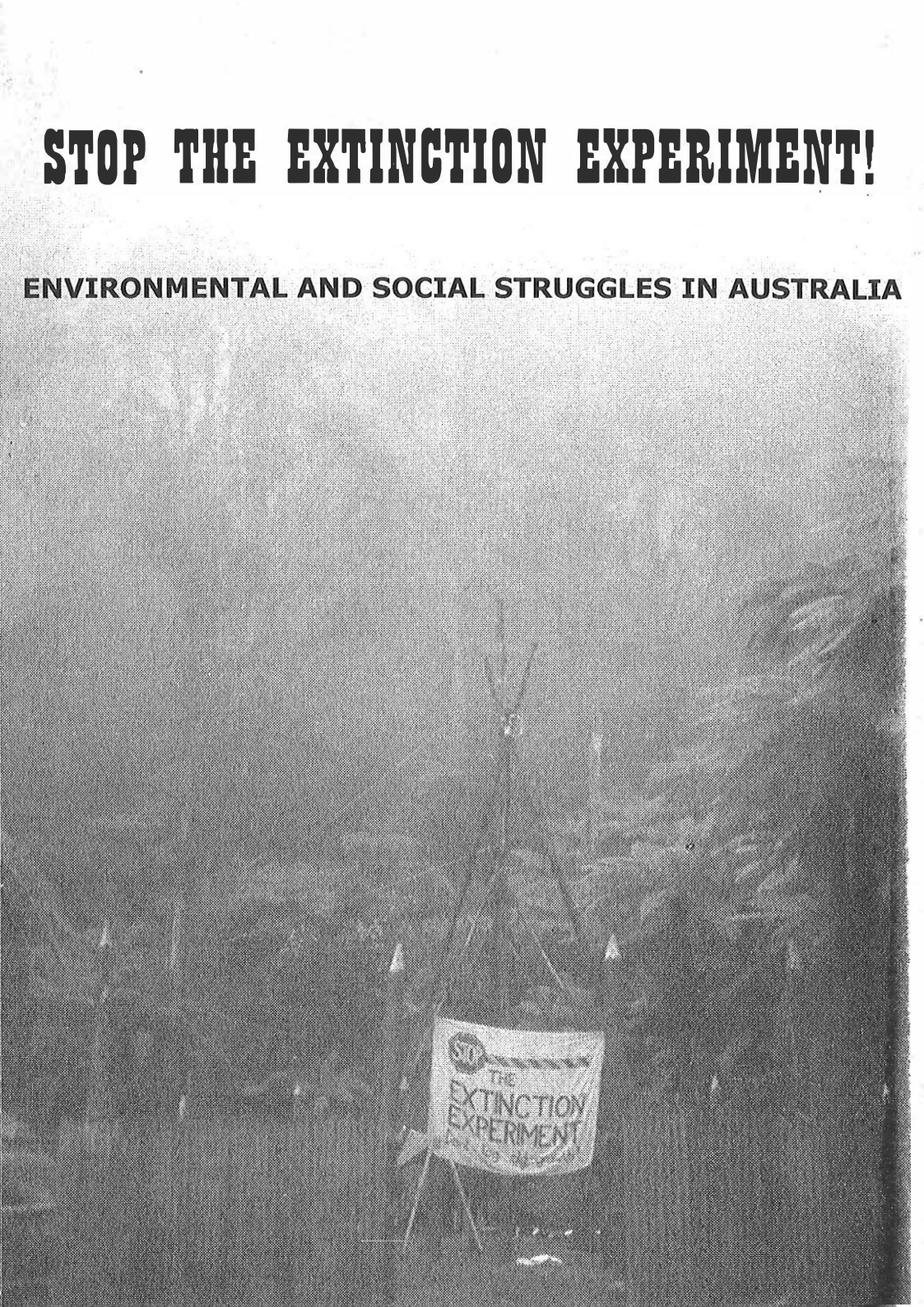
STOP THE EXTINCTION EXPERIMENT!

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES IN AUSTRALIA



Front cover: Ferntree, January 2004

Back cover: Ferntree, April 2005

G'day everyone!

On my first visit in Australia in October 2003 it seemed more difficult to me than in Europe to find politically active people to catch up with and find out what's going on, where struggles are taking place and where help is needed. Now, in May 2005, after spending a total of nine months down under, I have an idea about the issues in this country and want to contribute with this zine to a better orientation for people who might want to visit Australia.
Most of my time I spent in the south-eastern part of Australia and was involved in a campaign against old growth logging. So please be aware that this zine is by far not a complete and detailed study, but written from the point of view of a European traveller and based on my own experiences. I want to give people an idea about Australia as well as encourage them to go there and support the struggle against the 'extinction project'. A lot of serious shit is going on over there and just a few people stand up against it with all their anger and passion.
They are only a handful of people, but to me they are very inspiring as well as great friends.

The Chook

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The struggle of the Aboriginals

Canberra is ugly. Cold monotone architecture, a hostile atmosphere. The Australian capital city perfectly represents the government. But right in the heart of Canberra, in front of the old Parliament House, there is a park. And in this park, there is a camp set up. A few tents, kitchen, and the fires are going. This could well be the support camp of a blockade. But it is the Aboriginal Embassy.
I meet an elder and a few more Aboriginals who are permanent residents of the Tent Embassy. I walk up to the sacred fire of peace and justice and put in a few leafs to show respect. The fire was lit in 1998 by Arabunna elder Uncle Kevin Buzzacott and has been burning constantly ever since.
The sun sets, I'm sitting at another fire with my friends and some people of the Embassy. Our dinner is sizzling in the pots, around us the shadows of the trees of the park grow dark and above us the first stars twinkle. It feels like being out in the bush again. I turn around and there is the old House of Parliament who's existence temporarily slipped out of my mind. What a strange place. I wonder how it all developed into what my eyes see today. And here's what I found out.....

In 1770, captain Cook claimed to have discovered an empty land. Terra nullius. That means it belongs to no-one. At least, that's what captain Cook said. In reality, the continent known today as Australia was inhabited by about 500 nations or tribes, leaving no blank spot on a map of the country. The oldest evidences proving occupation of the land are dated 60000 years old. The instructions of the King of the British Empire for Cook's mission were clear: "If you find the country uninhabited take possessions for his Majesty." This order went along with the current international law of Europe in the late 18th century. The British could only claim ownership and settle on lands that were uninhabited. The other legal possibilities were to either purchase some land of the indigenous people or to defeat them in war. But no treaty between Aboriginal people and the conquerors has ever been signed. No war has been declared and if they would have done so, the British still would have to respect the rights of the indigenous people. The history of white Australia began with a lie and the breaking of a law. Hence, the state of Australia is illegal and the white invaders committed a crime which is ongoing since 217 years.

In 1788, Europeans began to settle, at first in the area which today is

Sydney. And with the settlers came germs like typhoid, smallpox, flu and venereal diseases, deadly for the Aboriginals who had never been in contact with them before. The killing had begun.
The genocide on indigenous Australians had and still has many faces. They got forced off their land which was the centre of their lives, their identity. It was destroyed by deforestation, agriculture and livestock, and poisoning. The Aboriginal people got massacred. They were raped, families torn apart, their culture was being destroyed wherever possible. Their daily life was turned into hell, being discriminated against by law and in the social routine. Some had been locked away in reserves like prisoners, being forced to work for no payment.
Between 1910 and 1970 up to 100000 Aboriginal children, that is 10-30% of all indigenous children, got taken away from their families by police or welfare officers. A lot of them were of mixed Aboriginal and European decent. The aim was, in order to "help" them, to assimilate them into the white society by destroying their Aboriginality. Most of them were raised in church or state institutions. They suffered under poor living conditions and malnutrition as well as from physical and sexual abuse. They received very little education and were later forced to do low grade domestic and farming work. Hardly any of the children saw their families ever again. The people of the Stolen Generation suffer from profound and long lasting emotional and physical damage. When urged to take on responsibility for this crime, the lawyers of the government argued that the removal of the children was done for their own good. The Australian government has never apologized or paid any compensation.

Since they regarded the land as theirs, the white invaders did with it whatever they wanted. Like on the 15th of October 1953, when they launched the atomic bomb "Totem 1" at Emu Junction. The deathly cloud of the fallout hit the Aboriginal communities and the Aboriginals walking the desert in that area with devastating consequences. There were warning signs set up before the test, in many different languages, but none of them was Aboriginal. The survivors neither received help nor compensation.
On 9th of October 1957, the British government tested nuclear weapons at Maralinga. Within 200 miles of range of the bomb there were thirteen Aboriginal settlements. The responsible Australian safety committee knew that the place was highly unsuitable for the tests, but in following inquiries the chief British scientist denied that he had been told about the Aboriginals living in this area. It was only when over 1700 servicemen who had been exposed at Maralinga started to suffer, that the horror of the bomb began to emerge. When the

servicemen started asking questions, they were told to keep quiet or they would have to face a thirty years jail sentence.

The first European settlers were tolerated or even welcomed by the indigenous people. But soon it emerged that the invaders were not interested in a peaceful coexistence but came to obtain the treasures of the land through violent force. The Aboriginals mounted a guerilla campaign against them but were soon overwhelmed by the white people's rifles and horsepower.
Since 1925, Aboriginal political organizations were slowly being formed to create links between the communities and work against the devastating effects that the spread of the white invasion had on them. One of the first attempts to assert control over their own destinies was the foundation of the Australian Aborigines League by a group of Koori (that is a tribe) political activists. The aim was to "gain for Aboriginal people those civil and human rights denied since the occupation".
Most of the organizations had a quite non-confrontational, conservative approach to the problem and failed to change the situation for Aboriginal people significantly. Also in a lot of them Aboriginals were only a minority. Indigenous political activist Paul Coe stated that "too many white liberals run black affairs. Nothing will get done until young blacks take the initiative."
Another disappointment was the referendum of 1967. Its aim was to end discrimination against the Aborigines by state governments. The legal boundaries within which the Federal Government could act were altered. It was now able to make special laws for the benefit of Aboriginal people and enforce them, because federal law prevails over state law. But during the first five years after the referendum the Federal Government made no use of this opportunity. In fact, the referendum worsened the situation of the Aboriginals at first. They were now to be paid the official minimum wages that also applied to white employees, and as a result a lot of them lost their jobs as underpaid farm or domestic workers.
This situation led to an attraction to the more direct action tactics of the Black Power movement which first emerged in the 1960s in the United States. Its aim was to seek self-determination without white interference. The ideas got spread around Aboriginal people when African-American troops, who apparently were America's cannon fodder in Vietnam, came to Sydney on Rest and Recuperation leave. Because of the wide spread racism, they gravitated toward the black community of Redfern. Consequently, the indigenous activists became exposed to the latest developments of radical politics in America and were provided by black GIs with some of the latest in Afri-

can-American political literature and music.
On the streets of Redfern, Aboriginals were daily confronted with the racist and corrupt police. Especially the notorious and brutal 21 Division, created in the 1930s as an early form of paramilitary unit, began a presence in Redfern when the Black Power movement emerged. Hence the level of police harassment of the community increased. Inspired by the American Black Panther Party's program called the "Pig-Patrol", Redfern activists began monitoring and keeping a record of the ongoing police harassment. They collected extensive evidence of arbitrary arrests, beatings, wrongful imprisonment and other serious allegations. In return, the Police Crime Surveillance Unit secretly compiled a dossier on the Black Power group in which detailed information on key activists was combined with records of Aboriginal bank robbers to accentuate the implied criminality of the group.
In 1970 Australia's first free shop-front legal aid center opened its doors in the heart of the black community. For the first time Aboriginal people were being represented in Sydney courts and were defending charges brought against them by police.

An event in June 1971 had a profound effect on the indigenous political movement and divided white Australia on the issue of racism: the visit of the South African Springbok rugby team, who were going on a six weeks tour of Australia. The Aboriginal activists used the awareness about racism in the strong Australian anti-apartheid movement to show how racist their own country was.
For one of their actions during this time Redfern activists got given some genuine Springbok rugby jerseys. In South Africa it wouldn't have been possible for a black person to wear one due to the apartheid system. When wearing them outside the rugby team's motel, the Aboriginals were warned to take them off or they would be charged because the people in the hotel found it offensive.
With many more actions like this during the Springbok tour and a riot in Melbourne where 200 people got arrested, race issues were suddenly at the forefront of the political debate. Wherever the tour went, there was a small group of indigenous people among the anti-apartheid protestors.

In 1972 the Aboriginal people were revolting in four states and through their publicity the Prime Minister William McMahon was forced to formulate a response. He decided to do so one day before the National Day, regarded as Invasion Day by the indigenous people, which was to be seen as a very provocative move. The Prime Minister stated that the government decided to review the decision

made the previous year that Australian law did not recognize Aboriginal title to land in Australia. But the result of the review was not satisfying. Instead of a system of land rights through granting of freehold title, they decided to create general purpose leases. Mining would be permitted to continue on Aboriginal lands.
The core of the Redfern Black Power group discussed how they should respond on the government's statement. They decided on confronting the government on its own ground. On 27th of January 1972 four activists pitched a beach umbrella on the lawns outside Parliament House in Canberra and proclaimed the site as the Aboriginal Embassy. They declared that the Prime Minister's statement the day before had effectively relegated indigenous people to the status of "aliens" in their own land, thus as aliens they "would have an embassy of their own". Normally such a project would have lasted as long as it took the police to arrive, but the group had accidentally discovered a loophole in the Australian Capital Territory ordinances regarding camping in Canberra. There was no ordinance that prevented camping on the lawns of Parliament House as long as there were less than twelve tents.
The Aboriginal Tent Embassy attracted the interest of a diverse group of people and it became the most successful protest venture yet launched by the Aboriginal political movement.
On its third day, the Embassy issued a five point plan for land rights. It demanded Aboriginal control of the Northern Territory, legal title to all existing reserve lands and settlements throughout Australia and a minimum compensation of at least six billion Australian dollars and a percentage of the gross national product for lands alienated.
To end the embarrassment, the government introduced a new ordinance that made it an offence to camp on not leased Commonwealth land within the city. Without warning the Tent Embassy got immediately forcibly removed. Three days later hundreds of Aboriginals held a demonstration and tried to re-erect the Embassy, which got prevented by the police. It was the most violent confrontation in the history of Canberra, followed on the 30th of July by the biggest land rights demonstration with more than 2000 people.
Through the pressure that the bad publicity put on the government, the Trespass on Commonwealth lands ordinance got declared invalid and the Embassy was re-erected.
In the 1972 federal election campaign the labor party stated that "Australia's treatment of her Aboriginal people will be the thing upon which the rest of the world will judge Australia and Australians". Finally, the conservative government that was in power for 22 years, lost the election to a labor landslide.

The start of the Tent Embassy, Canberra 1972

Very slowly legal changes came about that influenced the situation of the Aboriginal people. Since the 1967 referendum they were considered citizens and were counted in population statistics which revealed their very poor health record, especially on categories like infant mortality. They also got the right to vote.
1993 the Native Title Act was introduced. It states that Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders have rights to their land where they follow traditional laws and customs and have a continuing connection to it, as long as their title has not been "extinguished" by legislation or act of government.
The Native Title Act is still far from a sufficient solution to the land rights question. Making a claim is complicated and takes years. It is often difficult for indigenous people to prove their connection to the land because they got forced to leave it and give up traditional practices. In their society, records were not written down but kept through song, dance and stories. Due to the genocide, many of the secret ceremonies that tell the history of the land are forever lost.

Life in the black community in Redfern is still full of inconveniences caused by the white government. In 1973, The Block (a part of Redfern) was as the first and only part of Australia returned to the Sovereign Nations. Now, the government wants it back to redevelop it and forcibly remove the Aboriginal people. But the Aboriginal Housing Company has its own plan for the redevelopment of The Block which has the full support of the community.

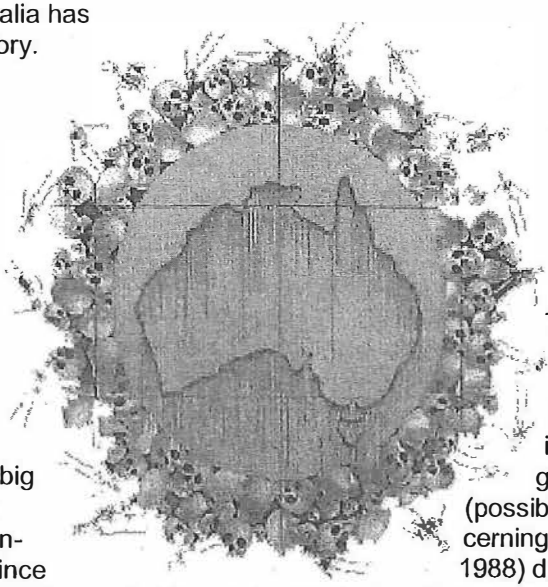
Redfern has seen many riots in the past, the most recent one in February 2004, when police chased a young Aboriginal man on his pushbike for no apparent reason, causing his death. The following peaceful assembly of the grieving people got violently assaulted by police, resulting in the resistance of the desperate and enraged community. Like usual, the cops got away with it and even got increased powers to use at will against the community.

Today, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy unites the voices of the Aboriginals. In the last 33 years, many advancements for the indigenous people have come from here. Following this story of success, more Aboriginal Embassies and Going Home Camps have been started up.
But racism is still strong in Australia (today also among some Aboriginals against whites) and the genocide continues. The Embassies have been under attack many times, from complaints that they are an "eyesore" to arson attacks. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy alone got firebombed three times during the last twelve months. There has been no proper investigation about it and the request to obtain copies of the old Parliament House security video tapes was neglected.
On the 26th of January 2002 in an action led by the elders of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, the Coat of Arms got removed from the old Parliament House. It displays the Kangaroo and Emu, which are Aboriginal sacred totems. The Australian government never asked permission to use them as their logo. Following this action, Uncle Kevin Buzzacott got charged with theft. He refused to recognize the jurisdiction of the courts that were attempting to charge him and questioned the sovereignty of the government. Nevertheless the government failed to provide any documents that would prove its legal state according to international law, Uncle Kevin was found guilty and has been handed a 12 month good behavior bond.

A group of Aboriginal elders charged the government with genocide against the Aboriginal people. The courts ruled that even though Australia was amongst the first nations to sign the 1948 Genocide Convention, there was no domestic legislation that prohibited genocide. In 2002 a domestic legislation was passed that made genocide a crime in Australia, but a new attempt to sue the government failed again. The court didn't accept the charge.
The genocide of today has a different face than in the past, when open approval was given to massacre the Aboriginal people. These days only two percent of Australia's population is indigenous, but in jails their quota is much higher, e.g. 80% of all women imprisoned for public drunkenness are Aboriginal. They have one of the world's

worst health records while living in one of the wealthiest countries. Wealth that was generated by stealing the land of their owners, exploiting it and therefore killing it.
The cultural genocide of today is supported by the educational system which fails to teach the true history of Australia and neglects to teach indigenous languages. Still Aboriginal children are removed from their families, who are forced to live in third world conditions, by "Family Services".
Uncle Neville Chappy Williams stated "This colonizing government wants to wipe away all traces of Aboriginal people, wipe away our very existence. This government is illegal, and they know it. We have been reduced from sovereign owners of our lands to refugees in our own country."

White Australia has a black history.



And the struggle continues: The Black GST, a group of indigenous and non- indige- nous activ- ists have called for a big gathering and protest (possibly the big- gest one con- cerning Aborigi- nal affairs since 1988) during the 'Stolenwealth' Games (a big sports event a.k.a. Commonwealth Games) in march 2006 in Melbourne to bring focus upon their demands: Genocide to be stopped, Sovereignty to be restored, Treaty to be made.
Furthermore there will be a 'Sovereign Tour' organised by Aunty Sue Rankin and the Bringing Them Home – crew. It is a walk that leaves in January 2006 from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy via communities along the Murray river, stopping in with the Yorta Yorta (an Aboriginal tribe) and the Barmak Beats Festival and converging in Melbourne for the 'Stolenwealth' Games actions, afterwards travelling on to communities across Australia.

Forest destruction and conservation in East Gippsland, Victoria

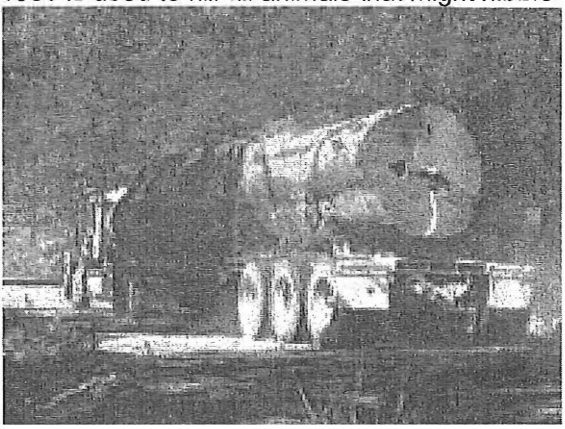
When I was living in London there was an image I kept inside of me that would warm my heart in the madness of this cold, grey concrete jungle. It was a spot in the middle of beautiful old growth where I spent three weeks in a blockade in the attempt to save it from logging. Every time I thought I couldn't survive one more day in the city, I recalled this memory:
Dawn. Mist flows down the hill and hangs in the crowns of giant eucalypts, covers fern trees in the spirit of ancient gondwanian times. The rich smell of the bush mixes with smoke of the first fire in the morning that keeps me warm until the sun climbs over the ridge. Cockatoos screech and kookaburras laugh, a lyrebird seems to make up its own song. I take in the spirit of the bush with all my senses, can't get enough of it.

More than one year later, I made my way back: The car follows the familiar road. Beautiful bush with patches of logged coupes in between fly past the window. The waterhole comes up on the right, we drive around the last corner... I feel a fist hit my stomach, pushing the air out of my lunges. There is the familiar smell of fire again, but this time rising up from the burned clearfell. What appears in front of my eyes leaves me speechless. Where the sight was caught up in endless green before, my eye can now easily follow the road downhill, winding between bare soil and burned trunks that are covering the ground, still sending up smoke. A few tall trees remain standing as a distant memory of what has been lost. Climbing ropes still hang down from an old tree that was bearing the hope that this place could be saved.

There is something about Australia that truly amazes me. In only 217 years, the European invaders have managed to cause an astonishing huge destruction of the environment. Since their arrival, around one half of the continent's forests have been cleared and the remaining other half has been changed significantly. Only an estimated 5% of the original old growth is still standing today. Currently Australia's woodlands are being cleared at the rate of 1000 square kilometers per year, forests are logged at the rate of 2000 square kilometer per year.
Australia's old growth forests started developing 65 million years ago on the ancient super continent of Gondwana and have survived 19

ice ages. In the last 20 years in some areas there have been more changes to certain plant communities than for the last 12000 years.

In Australia, the common practice of timber harvesting is clearfelling. Once a coupe proposed for logging is marked and a road pushed through the bush to access it, 'useful' trees are cut down, sawn into a size suitable for transport (which leaves a good part of the trees as 'waste' on the ground) and transported off. Bulldozers are used to access the trees and provide sufficient space for the felling and truck loading operation. This practice leaves nothing standing in the coupe except a few habitat and/or seed trees. Once the harvesting operation has finished, helicopters are sent out to drop napalm on the clearfell. This is supposed to influence the regeneration positively, leaving an ash bed for the seeds that are being dropped from the sky. Usually just a few commercially valuable eucalypt species are planted, re-vegetating the area with an even aged monocrop. In some cases, to make sure the seedlings don't get eaten, the poison 1080 is used to kill all animals that might nibble on the young trees.



Truck with one log load

In opposition to this stands a practice of selective logging where only a few trees with high value for the industry get cut down, the rest of the forest remains untouched. More hollow-bearing and rotting as well as young trees are left standing. It provides habitat and protects understorey species such as tree ferns. This was the dominant procedure in the beginning of the timber industry, but is hardly being used these days.

THE IMPACTS OF CLEARFELLING

Flora and fauna

An old growth forest can be defined as a forest which has had little human disturbance and is ecologically mature. It contains the maximum number of stages in a forest ecosystem with trees of all different ages.

One of the diverse reasons for the importance of old growth forests is their high level of biodiversity. Big old trees provide habitat and a superior food source for an estimated 400 animal species. Over 180 mammal species are dependent on hollow-bearing trees and other features of old growth forests. Trees start forming hollows from the age of 100 years onwards. During clearfelling a few habitat trees are usually left standing, but with all other plants cleared around them, hardly any animal would make them their home. A Great Glider for example needs a minimum of six large hollow-bearing trees per hectare to survive. Current guidelines in East Gippsland (southeast Australia) propose only a conservation of 0.3 hollow-bearing trees per hectare.
After logging, it takes between 1500 and 2500 years for a clearfelled area to regain all the structural and habitat features of the original forest. Currently, a big part of the re-growth is logged again after 30-100 years. In some parts of Australia, it is unlikely that a logged forest will ever be able to be restored due to climate change.
In Australia about 500 plant and animal species are in danger of extinction.

Soil and water

The soil of a logged coupe is highly disturbed, especially after a high temperature burn initiated by the dropping of napalm and soil compaction through the use of heavy machinery. Erosion occurs when rainfall that washes away the top soil which is not protected by plants anymore. Soil is produced at the rate of approximately one centimeter every 500 years.
In the first few years after logging it appears as there would be more water available in the area due to the greater off-flow. But when the new young trees grow bigger, they use a lot more water than a mature forest does. In the long run, clearfelling and replanting in a water catchment can reduce the water supply by half. This effects ecosystems as well as farms, communities and cities. Healthy woodlands are important to keep the salinity at bay in agricultural areas. Also the quality of the water is affected through increased entering of sediments from soil erosion and landslides. Logging can add between 45 and 60 tons of sediment per hectare per year into catchment rivers.
In 1992 a study by Melbourne Water found that a no logging policy of forest in water catchments would have a financial benefit of $147 million to the Victorian community, proving that water stored by forests has a higher economic value than logging. The clearing of for-

est and woodland in the Melbourne water catchment is one of the major impacts currently reducing its water supply. 1000 liters of water per second is lost to logging. The Victorian government calls it a draught and increased the water price in 2004 by 5% instead of protecting the catchment.
It takes about 150 years for the forest to recover in terms of optimum water production, but usually re-growth is logged again much earlier.

Fire and atmosphere

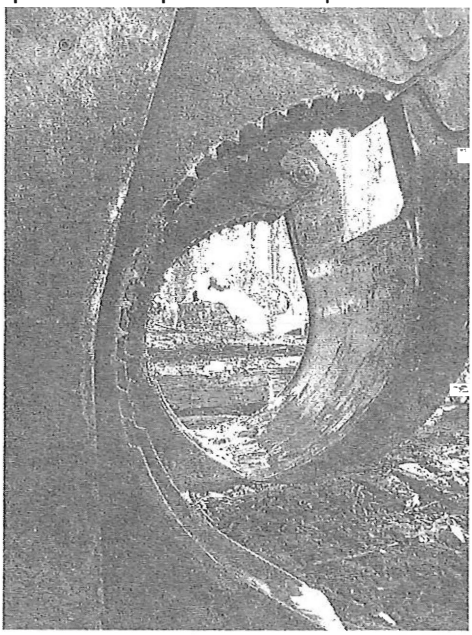
Old growth and mature forests contain natural barriers for fire: big fire resistant trees, moist features such as rotting logs, moss and a damp humus layer. Small and densely packed re-growth is much more fire prone.
Most forests recover quickly from wildfires, but through high temperature burns in clearfells the moist, protective covering of the soil is destroyed. In opposition to natural fires burns with napalm release a lot more carbon into the atmosphere through the process of mulch becoming ash.
To prevent wildfires, fuel reduction burns are deliberately started. There is little evidence for the success of this practice. In fact, it may have the opposite effect by drying out the vegetation which makes it potentially more fire prone. Fires have the tendency to change a forest character from wet to dry. It is also quite likely that burns have a negative effect on water quality in the effected area.
Another risk are logging roads which make the forest accessible for humans. Often a cigarette that has been thrown away is responsible for the start of a fire.
Trees store carbon which is slowly released when a dead tree decays. It is taken up by the younger growing vegetation. This makes forests carbon neutral. During clearfelling 20% of the standing carbon value is immediately released into the atmosphere. In Australia, logging and fire wood collection are responsible for the release of at least 50 million tons of carbon dioxide every year and are major contributors to greenhouse gas pollution. Furthermore, paper products made from pulp release carbon into the atmosphere as soon as they break down.
Even Australia's greenhouse gas abatement program, the Commonwealth 'Renewable Energy Act 2000', contributes to further pollution. It obliges electricity companies to produce 2% of their energy from renewable sources. Since wood is less expansive than solar or wind powered generation, Australia's forests get burned to fulfill the regulations.

THE LOGGING INDUSTRY

Saw logs vs. woodchips

In East Gippsland, large-scale logging and woodchipping began in the early 1970s. Since then over 150000 ha of forest have been cleared. Currently about 11000 ha are being logged every year which equals 15 football fields every day. Between 80% and 90% of this timber ends up as woodchips although the industry claims that only timber 'waste' is being woodchipped. Who ever has seen a clearfell knows that in reality what the loggers identify as 'waste' is simply left behind to rot or to be burned. About 800000 tons of wood are wasted through the practice of clearfelling each year.
Between 1993 and 2003 the number of trees being logged has doubled while woodchipping volumes increased 21 fold over the same period. Consequently, the percentage of trees used as saw logs has decreased.
Why did the logging industry develop in this direction?

1969 the Australian government signed a 40 years contract with Japanese companies to deliver a certain amount of logs to the Japanese owned woodchip mills in Australia. The woodchips are shipped to Japan and made into pulp to mainly produce disposable paper products. A part of these products is sold back to Australia. Japan got a very good deal: they pay only 11 cents royalties per ton of timber to the Victorian government which does all the work from roading to logging to replanting the clearfelled areas. Heavy subsidies paid to the timber industry, currently as much as $360 million per year, make this possible. Not only tax money is being wasted, there are more costs: the Victorian community also has to pay for the long term effects of the destruction of forests which don't even appear in the calculation of the government. Inevitably the income out of the more and



more popular eco-tourism is going to decrease. In NSW a study estimated that forest-based tourism is worth approximately three times the value of the logging industry.
What it all boils down to is that the Victorian community is paying to get their forests chopped down and then wipe their bums with them.

Another reason for the decreased percentage of saw logs in comparison to logs used for woodchipping is the quality of the timber that is being logged. The majority of the timber harvested in East Gippsland comes from native forests instead of plantations and contains a great percentage of old growth. Big old trees usually only supply timber of minor quality for saw logs as they are twisted and bear hollows. From the point of view of the industry it makes sense to get rid of old growth and create space for plantations to grow commercially more valuable tree species.

One argument for the current logging practice in East Gippsland that the timber industry as well as the government love to bring up is the conservation of jobs. Since there are no plantations ready to be harvested in this area, the jobs of the currently about 60 loggers would be lost if old growth logging would be stopped immediately.
But the argument of jobs doesn't work anymore when taking a look on the development of the whole timber industry instead of just the number of people occupied with logging. Woodchipping employs fewer people than sawmilling with little or no benefit to the local community. In 1996 four sawmills in East Gippsland have been closed down while the rate of woodchipping almost doubled. A great part of the timber taken from East Gippsland is now being taken across the border to New South Wales (NSW) and processed in the woodchip mill in Eden. It is owned by the Japanese company Harris Daishowa (recently renamed into South East Fibre Exports) which delivers the processed timber to Daishowa Paper in Japan. The other major woodchip mill delivered with logs from East Gippsland is the mill of Midway Forest Products in Geelong, Victoria. Through the Japanese Trading House of Mitsui they sell their woodchips to Nippon Paper. Australia currently supplies 50% of Japans hardwood chips.

Alternatives

Well managed plantations provide more jobs than the logging of native forest. They can also produce about fourteen times more wood per hectare and it is much cheaper to sustainably manage a plantation than sustainably manage a native forest. Only through heavy

subsidies products originating from native forests can still compete on the market.
Already ten years ago the economist Judy Clark found in a landmark study that Australia has enough plantations to meet all its timber needs. An immediate change over to exclusively harvesting timber from plantations is possible. The only problem would be that some jobs in the logging industry shift from one location to another, hence require flexibility of the employees.

Although being much more progressive than the logging of native forest, plantations are not the perfect solution. They are often made up of only a few commercially valuable instead of mixed native species. They have negative effects on water catchments and are more prone to fire than a native forest. Usually the soil can only support a maximum of three rotations of re-growth, after that the plantation loses its productivity.
A better alternative would be to completely move away from producing paper out of wood and replace it with fibers from hemp, bamboo or bagasse (sugar cane waste). Products out of recycled waste need to be more promoted and made attractive to the consumer, which means they have to be cheaper than products made out of native forests. Or to say it more clearly: the inconsiderate consumption of the world's recourses beyond what is needed for survival has to be stopped immediately!

Changes are happening slowly. Too slowly..... And there are people who don't sit around and watch how humans deliberately destroy in a short time what took 65 million years to develop. Time for action!

CAMPAIGNING AGAINST FOREST DESTRUCTION

The campaign I have the most experience with and which I'm writing about is based in East Gippsland in eastern Victoria. There are many more campaigns going on like in the Otways in western Victoria, Southeast Forest Rescue in NSW and in campaigns in Tasmania.

The situation in East Gippsland

East Gippsland has a big natural richness and variety through the diversity of its landscapes. It contains an overlap of warm and cool temperate ecosystems which support the largest stand of cool tem-

perate rainforest and the oldest undisturbed forest community in Victoria. East Gippsland covers only 5% of the state, yet it contains over 300 rare and threatened plant and animal species. Botanist Professor David Bellamy stated that East Gippsland supports 'the most diverse range of temperate forest ecosystems on earth'.
But the National Parks of the region are too small and scattered to ensure the preservation of this biodiversity and outside the parks forests are progressively being clearfelled.

Blockader at Eden Woodchip Mill getting removed by cherry picker

The departments of the government that are responsible for the destruction are the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) (!) who supervise the logging operations and VicForest who are occupied with forest management and lease the coupes to the DSE.
The government is supposed to ensure sustainable forest management, but it found many ways around this obligation.
First of all, they have a very narrow definition of old growth which excludes areas that contain more than 10% of young re-growth trees or less than 10% of the very oldest trees as it appears after wildfires. The government claims that 80% of the old growth is protected, but almost half of the protected areas are only made up of tiny patches which are unlikely to survive in the long run.
The same trick of blurry definitions is being used in the case of rainforests, which the Federal Government has agreed to not to log at all (apart from Tasmania). They contradict all existing non-governmental ecological definitions of rainforests. Furthermore, they are supposed to leave buffer zones, a strip of unlogged forest, to protect it from weather effects and other dangers coming from a clearfelled area.

These guidelines do not sufficiently protect old growth and rainforest. To make it even worse, DSE and VicForest don't follow their own minimal rules for protection. The buffers are supposed to be 40m wide, in practice they measure about 20m and thus make the logging operations illegal. The audits of the Code of Forest Practices for Timber Production through the Environmental Protection Authority from 2002 to 2004 exposed severe rainforest mismanagement. The report showed only 56% compliance to rainforest buffer zones. With no consequences for DSE and VicForest. Imagine trying to explain to a cop that you complied with the speed limit by over 50% when driving 190km/h in a 100km/h zone.

Independent grassroot conservation work

In the heart of East Gippsland lies the little community of Goongerah, a good part of it being inhabited by impassioned conservationists. The activities circle around the Goongerah Environment Center, called GECO. The campaign aiming to save old growth and rainforest in the region works on many levels: monitoring of logging operations and forest management, endangered species surveying, raising of public awareness, networking with other environment groups and traditional land owners and last, but by no means least, non-violent direct action.
GECO was first established in end of 1993 and has been a constant annoyance to DSE and VicForest ever since. In December 1996, possibly the world's longest running forest blockade commenced in the lush forest of Goolengook. Many people from all over the world visited and supported it. After a violent assault through loggers, the camp was even built into a proper fort. Finally, more than five years and 450 arrests later, the blockade was busted and logging took place. This whole operation (eviction of the blockade and logging) cost $2 million while the royalties paid to the government were only an estimated $110000. Nine months after the bust the government announced a moratorium on any further logging in Goolengook to enable the Victorian Environment Assessment Council to undertake an inquiry into the future of the region. Logging operations are halted until today, but Goolengook is still far from being permanently saved.

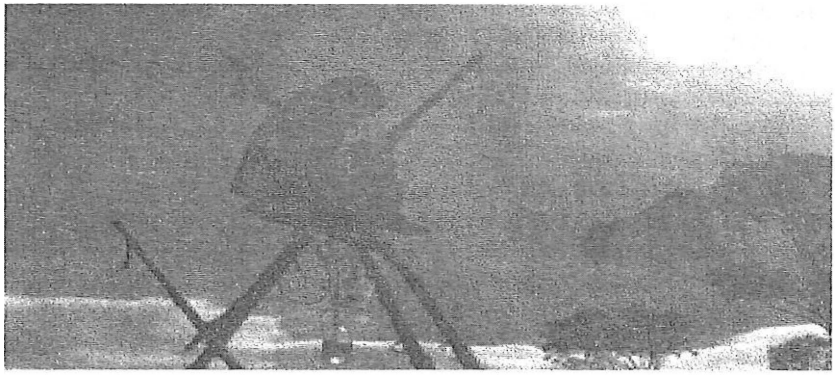
The main focus of blockading in the area around Goongerah for the last two summers has been on beautiful old growth and rainforest with the descriptive name of Ferntree. Many actions like locking on to roading machinery took place. The lockons usually consist of a metal tube with a bar welded to the inside. Either one or two persons

have chains around their wrists with a clip to fit around the metal bar. Once the machine is stopped (often through people jumping on it and shouting at the driver), they lock on to it in a spot that is hard to reach for the following 'Search and Rescue'-operation by the police. Actions like these usually end with 'Search and Rescue' cops cutting the metal tubes. To make it not so easy for them, lockons with a layer of glass can be used. This should prevent the simple use of an angle grinder. If there is enough time before the police turns up, a treesit can be attached to the machine. Given a maximum size of trees in southeast Australia of about 90m, most treesits are set up in a height between 20m and 50m and are usually free hanging.
In January 2004 conservationists managed to block the unfinished road to the coupe scheduled for logging for three weeks in a row. This succeeded through construction of tripods and bipods on the road which were connected to a treesit and the digging of two 'sleeping dragons' into the road. These are lockons buried in the ground in a concrete bed. If covered with dirt they are not easy to detect and can be left for later use. A more sophisticated version of this is a car dragon. The body of a wrecked car is welded into a metal cage with a hole in the bottom and then placed over a dragon in the ground.
The blockade in Ferntree got busted for the first time after two weeks, but it was only a half-hearted eviction with the treesit left up. One person got picked off the tripod-ridgepole-bipod construction by a cherry picker, another one got dug out of a dragon. The camp was pushed off the road to make way for the machinery. As soon as the police had left, the camp was reestablished and another dragon let in the ground. When the bulldozer moved in, it got stopped and captured. The contractor left its machine and soon a tripod was constructed over it, the dozer itself got connected to the treesit.
Finally, after another week, the blockade got busted in an early morning raid. 'Search and Rescue' dug out the dragon, disconnected the dozer from the treesit and climbed up to it to arrest the person sitting in it. The destruction of the camp and bad weather conditions forced the conservationists to retreat to GECO that day, but many more blockading actions took place.

It was more than one year later when the logging operation in the coupe was finally finished. The battle around Ferntree has been lost in the end. It hurts to see forest that got defended with so much energy and passion go up in smoke. Destroyed only to satisfy a system of stubborn bureaucracy, with nothing gained even from a financial point of view.
But in between all these losses, from time to time there is a victory.

Protesters who operated in this area long before GECO was founded managed to establish the Errinundra National Park. In this park amazing forest of gondwanian times is being protected. Just recently a coupe proposed for logging got taken off the harvesting plan because a giant tree was found. Members of GECO discovered Victoria's biggest tree with a circumference of 17m while collecting hair tubes to monitor endangered animal species. It is through a wide range of different activities, from blockading and office occupations to talks with forest workers and use of the media that long lasting conservation can be achieved.

The summer of 2004/05 has seen such a variety of actions. A skillshare took place at GECO with lots of workshops about direct action, climbing and botany, including film showings and parties. A great variety of people participated. The skillshare was followed by blockading actions in the forest. Not long after this the Activist Road Trip took place, going on a two week tour of political sites of significance in NSW and Victoria. Starting out with a convergence at Lake Cowal where a gold mine poisons the wetlands on Aboriginal land, hooking up with the mob of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, blockading the Eden woodchip mill for a day, stopping for workshops and a party in Goongerah and occupying the DSE office in Bairnsdale, it ended in Melbourne with Reclaim The Streets and a big hiphop event.
There are many ideas for the creation of an adventurous summer 2005/6. Another skillshare is possibly going to take place, followed by blockading actions. There are plans for a big festival to take place in Goongerah in January. Maybe another permanent protest camp is going to be established to prevent logging in a lush coupe containing old growth and rain forest, using new ideas and strategies that evolved this summer. And of course, to simply enjoy being surrounded by beautiful bush.



Mines

Beverly Uranium Mine

I'm on a different planet. Or at least it feels like it. Me and my van are the highest elevation as far as I can see. In the distance the dirt road melts with the sky into a yellowish grey. The perfect silence is only disturbed by the constantly blowing wind.
I am on my way to a small Aboriginal community in the desert of South Australia (SA) to find out about uranium mining in this area. In the community I meet an old indigenous woman who tells me about the Emu Dreaming and thus reveals to me a part of the ancient Aboriginal knowledge of this land.
Once the Emu got into a fight and as a result had to throw up. This vomit is now buried deep into the ground and no-one is allowed to touch it because it is very poisonous.
Today at the Sacred Site of the Emu Dreaming operates the Beverly uranium mine, leaching out the Emu's vomit and sucking it up to the surface where it doesn't belong and will do no good.

The Beverly uranium mine is owned by the US-American company Heathgard Resources, a subsidiary of General Atomics. To access the uranium that lays hidden deep underground, it uses the method of 'in-situ-leaching': sulphuric acid ('battery acid') is percolated through soil and rock to dissolve the uranium. The resultant solution is pumped back to the surface. This technique is actually banned in the United States because of its fatal impact on the environment. As the cheapest means of disposal, the liquid waste is simply pumped back into the ground and thus leads to massive, permanent contamination of the ground water.
In addition to the environmental disaster, the operation of the mining company also has a social impact on the nearby Adnyamathanha community. To give their project a legal touch, the company tried to buy the mining site of the Aboriginals, thereby splitting them in two parties. The few who were willing to sell were presented by the company as representatives of the whole community. They pretended that the Aboriginals supported the project and generated a severe conflict among the Adnyamathanha.

In May 2000, the international Earth Dream environment group and local people launched a protest at the mining site. The peaceful protesters got violently attacked by the police, pepper sprayed and then locked up in a shipping container. The few holes of the container that

allowed air inside were welded shut, subjecting the locked up protesters to welding gases. In addition to the South Australian police, the special 'Star Force' paramilitaries flew in from all over Australia to protect the interests of the overseas investors.

Olympic Dam uranium mine

All you can see at daytime in Roxby Downs are young mothers with their children doing the shopping. Most of the fathers are working in the nearby mine called Olympic Dam. It is a clean little town, with fairly new houses. The desert community started expanding when the copper/ uranium mine commenced operations in 1988. Someone told me Roxby Downs has one of the highest baby rates in Australia. Apparently because there is not much to do, accept making babies. What a happy fertile place.

But there are some little details that differ from other happy little Australian towns. The houses for example lack any construction to collect rainwater. And someone in the local pub tells me 'of course I'm not stupid, i won't stay longer than three years in this place.' And why is that? The wind whispers the secret in my ear. The always-blowing desert wind. It carries dust from one place to another. Also from the mine with its radioactive and toxic tailings stored under open sky to Roxby Downs. It is of little help that all vehicles get their tires hosed down when leaving the mining site when you can literally see the wind picking up the dust and carrying it away.

And it is not only with the help of the wind that the mine spits its poison all over the place. Olympic Dam has a long and constant history of tailings spills. In order to produce 21000 tonnes of copper and 5000 tonnes of uranium oxide each year, there are 10 million tonnes of radioactive, poisonous waste generated each year, which equals about 1000 tonnes per hour. It is stored in the tailings dump that currently covers more than 500 ha, standing 10m in height. It may cover an area of 1000 ha in the long term, the largest pile of uranium tailings on earth. One might think that such a gigantic poisonous dump would be closely monitored since the waste is not even covered up

and thus not isolated from the environment. But no, between 1990 and 1994 about three million cubic meters of radioactive tailings disappeared through a massive leak. The responsible people actually knew about the leak for quite a while, but it was only when it was getting too big to ignore it or explain it away that they fixed it. Other problems like the kerosene stored in an open pond (imagine the immense loss by evaporation!) that caught on fire twice were eventually solved (they store it now in closed tanks). But the reports of tailings spills never seem to stop (e.g. in 2003 the spill of 650000 litres).
And there is more wrong with this mine. It uses up to 42 million liters of water a day to process the ore. Remember where we are? Welcome to Australia, the driest continent on earth! The water is pumped up through bore fields from the Great Artesian Basin, a water body that lies deep under the surface of central Australia. This freshwater supports many mound springs in the arid region. They are natural up-dwellings of water which over millennia deposit waterborne minerals that form into mounds. To the Arabunna, the indigenous people of this area, they are of cultural significance. Some of them have already stopped flowing, others are close to it.
So who are these people responsible for all this destruction? It is the WMC Ltd., the Western Mining Corporation (surprisingly this time an Australian owned company). They sell the uranium to states such as the USA who has no intention of fulfilling their disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Other customers are France, the UK, Japan and Russia. WMC already proved in another part of the world that they don't have any conscience: they are active on the Filipino Island of Mindanao, terrorising the opponents of their plan for a giant copper and gold mine.
In Australia, they are the most outspoken opponents of indigenous land rights and progressive environmental legislations. They also have mounted an extensive campaign against the World Heritage nomination of the Lake Eyere Basin which lies close to the mine. WMC is the single largest electricity user in SA and the single largest greenhouse gas polluter in SA (giving the lie to claims about 'greenhouse gas-free' nuclear power). For the protection of the environment in this area they have made provisions for maintaining the tailings dam for 200 years. Too bad that the half-life of one of its components is up to 75000 years long.
An outlook into the future of the already largest mine in Australia: WMC is hoping to double or triple the output of the mine, using up to 100 million litres of water per day. Close your eyes, breathe in deeply and make more babies.....

Lake Cowal gold mine

Lake Cowal in NSW is the largest natural inland lake in the state and belongs to a network of wetlands. Wetlands act as giant sponges, absorbing rainfall and slowly releasing it over time. They control floods, purify water and provide wildlife habitat, especially for birds. Lake Cowal supports more than 30 threatened species of water-birds. The earth has lost over one half of its wetlands in the last 100 years, in Australia 89% of them are already destroyed.
In this beautiful and precious landscape, the Canadian trans-national company Barrick Gold started setting up a mining site last year, with the operation planned to commence in 2006. The traditional owners of this land, the Wiradjuri, have fought against it in the courts for more than two years now. The company has already collected over 5000 Aboriginal stone artefacts from the mining lease, many more will be destroyed. The artefacts are between 2000 and 4000 years old, at least as old as the pyramids of Egypt.
The open cut gold mine will be one kilometre long, 825m wide and 325m deep. Hopefully the miners know how to swim, because the mining area, as well as the proposed site of the toxic tailings dams, lie partly within the high water level of the lake. The only barrier will be an earth wall, build on an area known to include many clay depressions, called gilgais. Some gilgais are known to have fallen in when dams on farms were constructed on top of them.
Like most mines, the gold mine will consume an enormous amount of water: up to 17 mega litres a day, that equals 17 Olympic swimming pools. The estimated final volume of the pit is 80000 mega litres.
But not only water is used in the procedure. The gold is leached out of the rock with cyanide. 6000 tonnes of this poison will be transported from Gladstone in Queensland to Lake Cowal per year across many river catchments and towns. One teaspoon of a 2% cyanide solution can kill an adult human. The list of cyanide spills and leaks in the gold mining industry is long. Europeans might remember the pollution of the Tisza and Danube rivers in Romania and Hungary in 2000, cause by an Australian owned mine. Thousands of tons of fish died in these rivers that had been some of the cleanest in Europe.
So what is this big risk taken for? Approximately 80% of all gold produced is used for jewellery. It takes 18 tonnes of earth, generating 12 cubic metres of tailings, to produce enough gold for an average wedding band.
Water is more precious than gold!

These are just a few out of the countless mines in Australia, and there are more to come. In Ceduna, SA, there was recently a new uranium deposit found, enough to produce three times as much as the Olympic Dam mine.
Along with mining and the nuclear industry come the protests against it. Just recently the campaign of the Kupa Piti Kunga Tjuta succeeded in opposing the plans for a shallow burial radioactive waste dump in SA. The Kungas are all women elders who got exposed to the radiation of the nuclear bomb in Maralinga more than 50 years ago and are now fighting against the nuclear industry.
This campaign is won, but that does not make the nuclear waste disappear. The Australian government is still looking for a place to dump the waste cheaply, on the costs of safety.

No Nuclear Waste Dump in Australia

Refugees

To ask the Australian immigration for a visa is a bit like asking a wild bunch of burglars who are taking your friend's house apart if you may enter and hang out for a while, maybe even give them a hand. It helps a lot if you are white and speak good English. Officially, the White Australia Policy of the government that denied immigration to people with darker coloured skin, especially from Asia, was abandoned in 1973. But when reading comments in newspapers and magazines on immigration issues, one can suspect the feeling of disappointment about this development that a lot of the writers seem to share.

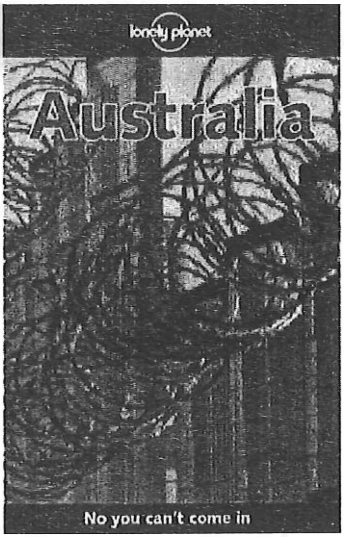
As a big and wealthy country, Australia puts a lot of effort and money into keeping refugees away or at least turning their life into hell, so it is a less attractive destiny for the persecuted and tortured people of this world. The Australian government justified its involvement in the war against Iraq with S. Hussein's human rights abuse against its own people, yet refugees from Iraq only got temporary protection visas and faced deportation. With Iran the government even has a secret deal to return asylum seekers although they may face torture or death. And for Afghanistan there are still travel warnings being issued, yet the country has been declared as safe for the return of refugees.

With the 'Tampa crisis' in 2002 emerged the 'Pacific Solution': people who come with a boat to seek refuge in Australia and haven't reached the coast yet (but are already in Australian waters) when they get discovered are send to Pacific islands and have to stay there while their case is being dealt with. In the case of the ship Tampa that broke down, the asylum seekers were sent to the impoverished island of Nauru where some of them are still waiting to be accepted or rejected as refugees by the Australian government. This tiny island lacks the infrastructure to support much more people than the inhabitants and doesn't have important facilities such as lawyers. When boats make it to the Australian coast before breaking down or being discovered in the 'Migration Exclusion Zone', the refugees are brought to so called 'immigration centres', read detention centres, where they are being locked up like criminals. Australia is obliged to not subject them to arbitrary detention, treat them with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person. Instead of receiving the help they have a right to by international law and by treaties that Australia has signed, they experience even more psychological and physiological stress and abuse.

The most famous detention centre was the one in Woomera, SA.

Through actions and protests inside and outside the world learned about the inhumane conditions that the refugees were forced to live in and what the Australian government tried to hide in the middle of the desert. I remember seeing pictures on TV in Europe of desperate people in the detention centre who had sown their lips together so their cry would be heard on the other side of the fence. Throughout the years, there were many riots, hunger strikes and breakouts. The fences got stormed at and cut twice by activists from outside, resulting in the escape of about 35 refugees in each go. Most of them were caught later, but some are still out, living their life in Australia.
The Woomera detention centre was closed down in the end due to very bad media and resulting public outrage. But the situation of the refugees remains the same. The detainees of Woomera got transferred to the Baxter detention centre in Port Augusta, SA. This is a maximum-security prison with cameras everywhere and an electric fence. The children who are being detained don't get any education; in fact the place doesn't provide any intellectual stimulation at all. There is no sufficient medical care. Living conditions are much more badly than in the average Australian jail. A place in community housing with case management would only cost half as much as detaining a person at Baxter.

Being a white person, by coincidence born into a wealthy country and with a funded knowledge of the English language, I don't have much difficulty entering Australia or any other country of the world. I'm so used to going wherever I want to that travelling actually became part of my identity. It's sometimes easy to forget that there are different realities for different people. But what if that piece of paper resembling my passport vanished out of my hand, what if my skin turned darker, what if.... then I would be tossed into the other world, into this parallel universe that exists side by side with mine, yet unnoticed by most of the 'privileged' people around me. Would anyone answer my cry?



by lab-rats

This system makes me sick, so unbelievably sick. This system and the people supporting it, knowing themselves on the winning side. I wish everyone would experience the other side, just for one day.....

The End

This is the end of the little tour through 'my' Australia, but by far not the end of the story. I didn't mention many of the current problems like the introduced species that shake up the ecosystem and are often responsible for the decimation or extinction of native species. I didn't tell you how European agriculture rapidly destroys the soils and leads to salinization of the land, therefore decreasing its fertility. Australia's ecosystem is extremely fragile and radical changes have to be made to stop turning this continent into a complete desert one day.

I believe environmental and social struggles are not two different things but include one another, with more focus on the one or the other topic. In Australia (like in many places around the world), fighting for the environment is also a social issue. For example some of the Aboriginals are still strongly connected to the land and a further devastation of it would mean to them the loss of home, identity and culture. And also for the about 20 million non-indigenous people that are living in this country environmental destruction becomes more and more a social issue: farms have to close down, the fishing industry doesn't yield as much as before and amazingly beautiful places like the forests vanish.

Maybe more people would get active in Australia if they would be aware of this interdependence. A lot of them will only realize what's going on when the effects of their destructive behaviour directly hit them. And then it is usually too late. So let's remind them as much as possible of the consequences of their acting and stop the extinction project by every possible means!

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